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ABSTRACT

In looking at the forms language takes, linguists sometimes forget to ask the obvious question about the relationship between the forms language uses (phonology and syntax) and the function language is expected to play as a vehicle of communication. Probably the bulk of our daily communication involves the allocation and use of power, the politics of language. One way to examine the relationship of form and function in the allocation of linguistic power is to look at the tag question, a construction unique to English that in form is somewhere between a question and a declarative but in function is better viewed as a declarative. The tag question functions to establish a political balance in discourse, both in ordinary conversation and in more obviously political situations, as in a courtroom. The syntactic complexity of the tag question can only be understood through its political implications. By extension, we can more fully comprehend our own and others' communicative aims and needs by observing the choice of forms in the actual context in which they are used. (MSE)

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THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

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In looking at the forms language takes, linguists and others concerned with language sometimes find themselves so intrigued by the minutiae that they forget to ask the obvious question--or rather, forget that there is an obvious question to be asked: how do these forms serve the functions of language? What, more precisely, is the relation between the forms a language makes use of (its phonology and syntax) and the function language is expected to play as a vehicle of communication? It is fashionable in many areas of human endeavor to cite the modern proverb, "form follows function." Is this true as well in the area of language use? Could we, for instance, better understand, and therefore better teach, syntactic form if we knew why the rules existed, how they developed to facilitate communication? Can we assume that these rules of grammar do exist to serve a purpose--that their complexities arise for a reason based on human needs and capacities?

To explore the question, we must make a few preliminary assumptions: first, that the purpose of language is indeed to communicate--ideas, feelings, relations among people--not merely to give the Language Acquisition Device a workout. Then we must assume that the grammar covers more territory than is sometimes believed: not only the predictions of the possible forms a sentence can take in a language, but the relation between those forms and the context in which they are used: prior discourse, prior assumptions, and social requirements of participants, to state a few determinants of "context." We must ask, then, what we mean to achieve by speaking as we speak, to those to whom we speak, and bearing in mind that none of us comes into conversation as a tabula rasa--we presume and presume upon one another's prior knowledge.

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It is a comforting platitude that the purpose of discourse is the communication of information. In part it is, but this is in many ways the easy and uninteresting part. If we were interested only in how to and what is, we would not have more than one way to say a thing, nor would it be so problematic to explain to students why saying something one way is "right," but saying what appears to be the same thing "wrong," and even potentially dangerous. It is true that both of the sentences

(1a) Shut up!

(1b) Could you try to keep the noise level down a bit?

contain the same informative content. And so it might be supposed that the first, being shorter and more to the point, is superior to the second as a means of expression. But if, on this basis, we regularly substituted the first for the second, we might find ourselves in sticky situations not infrequently--and perhaps, oddly enough, for all our clarity not being understood in the sense of getting our needs met.

To understand better what it means to say that linguistic form follows function, it will be useful to examine one especially crucial function of language--the establishment of relationships among participants in a discourse. The importance of this function can be seen from the existence of many devices that appear to make language less "logical," less suited to the perfect communication of factual information; but rather than dismissing these forms as mere excrescences, the products of a less-than-perfectly logical mind, we can understand them as designed to communicate, more covertly, something other than pure "useful" information: either intimacy or power (or perhaps, both at once).

The forms speakers use for intimacy-creation and power-allocation may coincide or differ, just as the establishment of feelings of intimacy and the creation of a power hierarchy, different as these social functions seem, may sometimes be indistinguishable. Hence language employs pragmatic homonyms (forms similar to one another with different functions), as well as pragmatic synonyms (forms different from one another, but serving the same communicative purpose). An indirect way of expressing an injunction, like (1b), is an example of the former: it might encode a power imbalance in favor of the addressee; or it might express, in context, the desire to be friendly, to express or establish a relation of equality. Intonation may often disambiguate such homonyms, but often does not. The real-world context of the discourse helps, but often not sufficiently. In all cases of pragmatic homonymy involving the tension between intimacy and power, the potential for misunderstanding is present. The best will in the world cannot force such ambiguities out of language. And with good reason: we like our encodings of power to suggest friendliness; we like

our overtures of friendship to suggest, however delicately, the possibility that we could enforce our will otherwise. (I expect you found the first of my suggestions more palatable than the second. We are uncomfortable about our fondness for power, but our very hesitancy in acknowledging it suggests its ubiquity and its importance.) As for pragmatic synonymy, consider the relationship between (2a) and (2b):

(2a) That was sorta dumb of you.

(2b) Well, I guess that was dumb of you.

Both of (2) have an informative point to make: the denotative content of both is approximately: "That was dumb of you." Both seek to mitigate the harshness of the judgment: (2a) with a lexical hedge (sorta) on the dangerously judgmental adjective, (2b) with a hedge on the declarative force of the sentence as a whole (thereby conveying, approximately, "I am telling you this, but I don't expect you to take it as much to heart as I would if I expressed it without qualification"). So both examples are designed to let the addressee (and, in so doing, the speaker) off the hook, but by very different grammatical routes. Here, then, we see another example of the diversity of the means speakers have at their disposal to encode their communicative needs--and begin to sense the reasons behind this variety. So examining linguistic form from the perspective of these deeper and more covert needs is one way to understand how in language form follows function.

To illustrate these points, I might choose to look today either at the forms we use to create intimacy, or those used to allocate power. I have chosen the latter, for a couple of reasons. For one thing, we are only too eager to acknowledge our desire to pursue, by linguistic means and others, intimacy, equality and friendship. To point these out might be an exercise in obviousness, not to say an orgy of self-congratulation. Moreover, in general our intimacy-expressing devices tend to get the most use in circumstances in which closeness is already established--and therefore, they tend to entail less excitement and risk, since the ground rules for the relationship are already known to participants. Probably the bulk of our daily interactions (including the intimate ones) crucially involves the allocation and use of power: the politics of language. It is on this area, then, that I will concentrate.

Let us define politics as the allocation and use of power. We can further define power (for present purposes) as the ability to get one's needs met, wishes fulfilled, goals achieved. To speak of the "politics of language" is to talk about how we encode our needs in linguistic form, and how, in linguistic form, we make it more probable that we will get them met: how we suggest it would be better for our interlocutors if our needs were met. Since these needs are vital, all languages must

provide some means of encoding differences in power among individuals: some second-person address terms; some more informally, as in English with direct and indirect ways of giving orders. And in terms of general discourse strategy (as opposed to choices of specific forms), language is always, in one way or another, used with the intent to be persuasive: a speaker always hopes to convince an addressee of something, and by convincing someone you achieve influence--a close relative of power if not power itself.

One way to examine the relation of form to function in the arena of the allocation of linguistic power is to take a construction, the tag question, that is unique to English and in several other ways a curiosity, and see what its form can tell us about its function, and its function about its form--in terms of its use in the determination of power. This construction has exerted its mysterious charms over at least one generation of linguists[1], largely because (as long as we restrict our grammar to the prediction of form alone) it eludes full understanding. We can write rules to get everything in its proper place, but cannot explain why the rules do the peculiar things they do, much less why this rule is so embarrassingly complicated to state.

Tag-question formation produces English sentences which share some of the form, and some of the functions, of yes-no questions, and hence as the name implies are traditionally categorized as questions. The tag comes in two basic flavors: one in which a negative occurs in its first part, the other in which it is found in the second.

(3a) John isn't here, is he?

(3b) John is here, isn't he?

While many generative syntacticians have labored long and hard to produce a formal description of the foundation of such sentences, the process can be described informally as follows: Starting from an ordinary positive declarative sentence, in this case John is here,

1. A copy of it is created: John is here John is here.

2. Auxiliary-inversion (identical to the process in yes-no questions) occurs in the copy:

John is here is John here?

3. The subject of the copy is pronominalized; all material to the right of the subject is deleted. John is here is he?

4. A negative is inserted in its usual position before one of the auxiliaries, either original or copy. This will produce

either (3a) or (3b).

We might note in passing an additional curiosity about the tag: to my knowledge, the rule as I have stated it occurs only in English. Many languages (including English) have other means of achieving similar results (e.g., Spanish verdad, French N'est-ce pas, Japanese ne, and English right and huh, all appended at the end of the declarative), but none of these involves anything like the same complex grammatical process, and this is what we want to explain. If there is a quantitative relation between form and function (and I am suggesting that there is), tag questions must carry a very heavy functional load, must do a great deal of communicative work, to justify the amount of syntactic labor expended upon them. And we might also suspect that the load they bear critically involves that favorite communicative bugaboo, power: as euphemisms typically are longer than the simple but unmentionable terms they replace, so a more complex form of communication is apt to be a comforting stand-in for the direct means of negotiating power.

If you found the blow-by-blow description of the syntactic process of tag-question formation less than riveting, not only do I sympathize, I applaud your discrimination. It was boring. And the reason it was boring is that it was pointless. Looked at from a purely syntactic standpoint (as traditional treatments do), the complex series of processes cannot be connected to anything real or useful: there is no reason for anything that happens. This sort of treatment ignores the fact that sentences don't exist in a vacuum: rather, discourse is uttered in a real context. Therefore, we can hope to understand the reasons behind the process of tag-question formation only by going beyond syntax, by asking what this syntactic minuet achieves for its dancers. We need to know both why tags show up in the forms they do (not, say, some other hopelessly complicated format), and why they are indeed so complicated. Since their syntactic complexity far outweighs that of their relatives, yes-no questions, we would like some evidence that, communicatively, they bear a correspondingly heavier load.

First of all, we realize that tag questions, like all other types of utterances, constitute members of some category of speech acts. I use the technical term, brought into pragmatic discussion by Austin (1962), to indicate that the form a sentence takes represents an intention on the part of its speaker to accomplish thereby some practical discourse function. To understand the function of the tag question in particular, and the unusual communicative load it bears, we have to ask what we use this form to accomplish. We note first that, although there are a vast array of possible speech-acts, there are probably only three basic types, three major categories of things we attempt to accomplish by uttering words, each with its own characteristic form.

1. Declaratives. These are typically used to offer information. They convey that the speaker knows something and wants to express it to the addressee (who is presumed to have a need to know it). The speaker vouches, by the use of a declarative, that the information is true and therefore expresses an assumption that the addressee will believe it. Declarative speech acts place the least communicative burden on both participants: only belief in what is being said. The addressee is not necessarily expected to respond in an explicitly-observable way. Hence, declaratives tend to utilize the basic sentence form in a language: in English, for instance, subject-verb-object.

2. Imperatives. These are used to get the addressee to do something, perform an action. It is assumed that the action is possible, and that the addressee would not do it without the injunction. Hence, imperatives are the most blatant of speech-acts in their explicit expression of a power imbalance between participants (the speaker's, of course, outweighing the addressee's).[2] Hence, the imperative tends to occur in a highly marked, idiosyncratic form: in English, with no surface subject, otherwise an impossibility.

3. Interrogatives. These are used by the speaker to elicit information from the addressee. It is assumed that the speaker needs the information, and that the addressee is able and willing to supply it. If the use of a declarative gives a speaker a (somewhat) greater degree of power than the addressee, this relation is reversed with interrogatives because the addressee is presumed to have something the speaker needs. But the ability to ask a question with the expectation of an answer also entails power, so it is perhaps in questions alone that the power in a conversation is truly under negotiation. But bearing this tenuous balance is a load on the communication, and questions are normally syntactically marked (in English, usually, by the inversion of the subject and the auxiliary, and often by special intonation as well). More than any other speech act type, questions are interactive: they encourage (or force) a response from the addressee. And because of its form, the tag is the maximally interactive form of the question. It is difficult not to answer such a question (at least with an evasion) and still appear to be a competent communicator.

In talking (as I have said) a major aim is to influence someone else, whether about content (our beliefs are correct) or about form (we are nice people, we communicate properly). Thus we seek to achieve power, or influence, within the interaction. Tags can be viewed as facilitating the second purpose by (apparently) undermining the first: they hedge, or qualify, the speaker's assumption of the right to belief; and in so doing, they appear (typically) to shift the declarative power imbalance more in favor of the addressee. By their form, intermediate between question and declarative, tags express their discourse function: a position of authority in between the two. But

although the tag is usually categorized in grammars as a kind of question (because of its form), actually it is better viewed as a kind of declarative. Its major aim is to communicate information, rather than to get it. What its speaker wants from the addressee, at most, is confirmation, rather than information. It is therefore a hedged or indirect declarative, as (2b) is a hedged imperative. Neither, despite surface form, is it functionally a question. Analogously, there are imperative-tags, hedges on imperatives that are questions in form, but imperatives in function:

(4) Come in, won't you?

So we can see that a declarative-tag like those in (3a) communicates:

1. Information (either "John isn't here" in (3), or "John is here," in (3b)).

2. The mitigation of the addressee's responsibility to believe the information conveyed, for either of two reasons:

   a. the speaker is, in fact, not totally sure of its correctness;

   b. the speaker does not have, or does not want to appear to have, sufficient authority to compel the addressee's belief.

But these are just two functions of the tag. We can think of them as qualifications on the declarative force of the speech act: they comment on and mitigate the force the speaker of a declarative normally intends to convey. The ambiguity, and complexity, of the tag form are enhanced by an additional consideration, the fact that tags are used to comment on and qualify the nature of the interaction between the participants. Questions, we have seen, unlike declaratives, encourage a response. So, attaching a question to a basic declarative form allows it to retain a fundamental declarative function (it provides rather than seeks information), but it acquires the pragmatic functions of a question: encouraging interaction, getting response. Because the tag, in essence, goes out of its way syntactically to do its job, it puts the onus of the necessity of response more firmly upon the shoulders of the addressee than does any type of true question. We might also note here that the functions of the tag we have identified are not separate: by demoting himself as the authority, a speaker encourages a response; by showing that the speech act is not complete, nor the speaker content, without the other's response, the tag suggests that the conveying of information is not the major aim of the utterance. But in some circumstances one function prevails, in others the other.

Nor does this bifurcation comprise the total ambiguity. Each function is itself capable of different understandings. To say, "I am not insisting on your belief," might convey either a real lack of sufficient information, or the wish not to appear authoritative. To suggest, as tags do, "Come on, you decide," might be cooperative: an invitation to join in creating the conversation; manipulative: an attempt to evade responsibility for what was being said by placing responsibility for its confirmation or correctness on the addressee; or coercive: an attempt to force a response from a reluctant other. The first utterance is characteristic of someone participating in a conversation of equals, or seeking to establish a relationship of equality; the second, of someone who is or feels or wishes to appear unequal and inferior; the third, of someone of superior power, who is in a position to coerce an unwilling respondent. In any event, the use of the tag in the first place, and the meaning that each participant is apt to attribute to its use, are clearly determined by the political situation in which the speech act occurs, and will in turn further define and underline the power relationship between the participants.

A couple of examples will help to show how the tag question functions to establish a political balance in a discourse. It is useful here to make a distinction between two levels at which the political choices speakers make are reflected in linguistic form. We may refer to them as the micropolitics of language versus its macropolitics.

Micropolitics, as its name implies, has to do with the allocation of power among individuals or members of small groups, in situations of relative intimacy, and normally in reciprocal discourse, where all participants participate equally, in terms of both quantity of contributions, and amount of influence. Here, political decisions go hand in hand with conversational strategies: power is allocated, and reinforced, on the basis of participants' conversational behavior: who takes the most, and the longest, turns; who interrupts whom; who selects and maintains topics; who is appealed to by the others as an authority, or as a source of support. Macropolitics, on the other hand, is the division of power in large groups, or between one group and another. In the area of the macropolitics of language we could place, for example, governmental decisions on official-language or bilingual-education policy; political rhetoric and the electorate's determination of effective style; advertising and other forms of mass persuasion; the definition, at some place and time, of that elusive characteristic we currently call "charisma." And finally, we can consider under this rubric the peculiar forms of language used by persons acting in official functions, as representatives of governments, or of "the people."

I have had an interest in both these areas for some time. Based on the use of tags, I will select from each of these two

aspects of political discourse one salient example, each as different from the other in function as possible while similar in surface form. One case will be taken from ordinary informal conversation. Some years back (1975) I looked at tags as characteristic of the speech of women, and I will look at them again from this perspective, extending my observations to the use of tags more generally in informal conversation, as a means of negotiating and denying power in a conversation. About six months ago I served on a jury in a capital case. Among its many riveting moments was the cross-examination of the defendant by the prosecution; and among the many fascinating things to be observed in these several hours of discourse was the prosecutor's extraordinary use of tag questions.

In ordinary conversation, among people who are at least conventionally functioning as equals, tag questions normally serve as hedges on the declarative speech act, markers of deference. Hedges, of course, are usable by anyone, at any time, but are particularly appealing to a speaker who wants to avoid responsibility for a statement--because it is unpleasant for someone, or because the authority necessary to make such a statement is not comfortable for that speaker, in that situation. But among the wide array of hedges, the tag question is one of the few with the additional function of encouraging contributions by others, increasing the tempo of interaction. Other speech-act hedges (like "I guess" or "y'know") or lexical hedges (like "sorta") merely qualify something that has been or will be said. If, as is argued, women see their role as creators of interaction, as well as people who prefer not to appear authoritative, the tag would function especially well for them. A problem with its use is this: being ambiguous between its semantic (responsibility-avoiding) and pragmatic (interactive) functions, it is generally open to misinterpretation. As a political ploy, it is appealing, but dangerous. It is apt to be perceived, regardless of how it was intended, as an opting-out of power, responsibility, and authority. It can be, and too often is, felt by hearers as manipulative--especially if they are speakers who would not typically use tags in the same environment. It is manipulative precisely because it straddles the declarative/question line, in the hope that on the one hand, hearers will take the utterance as a declarative and thus as worthy of belief, if it proves to be correct and appropriate; and on the other, that hearers will let the speaker off the hook by hearing the form as a question, and not holding the speaker to the normal expectations about reliability and truthfulness. You can't "lie" with a tag any more than you can with a question--but you can sneak in a claim for credibility, not quite openly. A tag is also manipulative because it leaves the addressee with little choice but to respond--and indeed, to respond as the form directs, positively or negatively. An addressee may feel toyed with, his options apparently left open, but actually closed off by the speaker: "Answer if you know what's good for you, and answer <u>like this</u>." As I said, this negative interpretation is

especially probable in case the tag is being used by the speaker in a context in which the addressee might not use it--at least, not with this purpose in mind. Hence, women's use of tags (intended to encourage interaction, as is characteristic in our culture of female and not male communicative style) often seems manipulative to men. Speakers of many if not all forms of British English use tags (both the non-matching type I have been discussing, and matching tags like So you're here, are you?) with much greater frequency, and in many more discourse contexts, than do Americans--this apparently true of both sexes. The non-matching tag seems to function, in British English, to cover many of the jobs done in our own dialect by a variety of hedges, including the oft-lamented y'know, or the California rully. Because of its greater provenace, it appears not to function for speakers of British dialects as forcibly as it does for us as a goad to interaction, and hence is not seen as manipulative in the same way. But when Americans encounter the British usage, they often feel pushed (by that quintessentially reticent race!), manipulated, and irritated by the frequency of appeals to respond. But as a rule, in American English, tags in egalitarian conversation are used, and perceived, as the tools of the powerless, actually or conventionally. Speakers who cannot or would not force belief or interaction use tags to encourage both indirectly.

Compare with this a macropolitical scenario: a courtroom in which a defendant stands already convicted of the most serious crime imaginable: murder in the first degree, with special circumstances. (Under California law, in a case of this kind a trial is conducted in two parts. In the first, the jury determines guilt or innocence; if the defendant is found guilty of first-degree murder with special circumstances, the trial reconvenes after a short recess, with the same cast of characters, to determine punishment, the only two choices open to the jury being life without possibility of parole, and the gas chamber.) The defense has put its client on the stand and subjected him to a morning's direct examination, in which he has been articulate and persuasive. Now, after the two-hour noon recess, the D.A. has his turn. You may note that, to be sure, this discourse too is dyadic, though not reciprocal (the rule is that the D.A. asks the questions, and the defendant gives the answers. The roles may not be reversed). This is a necessary condition for the examination of tag questions, since any other type of discourse minimizes their usefulness and, indeed, their probability of occurrence outside of occasional rhetorical questions. But although we have a conversational dyad, it is one in which the power structure is quite distinct: we have a representative of the State and the People, opposed at this point to a convicted felon. Another curiosity about this kind of discourse: we have already identified the asker of a question as the (at least momentarily) less powerful member of a dyad, because he/she needs something (information) from the addressee. But in this case, the questioner has the power. And indeed, he

does not himself need the answers. The jury needs the answers, and the D.A. is asking on its behalf. Moreover, unlike the ordinary situation, here the questions must be answered (or the defendant is in contempt of court, and worse, will antagonize the jury). So questions function less as requests for a speech act, and more as non-negotiable demands.

Then, too, the information the prosecutor was requesting, in his gentle, courteous, voice, hardly audible without straining, was not the usual in informal interchanges: information which it does the responder no harm to supply. Everything that was being asked for was potentially damaging to the defendant. It is true that the courtroom situation itself put him in a difficult position: by law, he had to answer. But that was an external constraint. The D.A., by framing his questions as tags, made the paradox internal to the defendant: if he answered, he damaged his case. If he failed to answer, he damaged himself, by showing himself to be an incompetent speaker, one who did not even know that you had to reply to a tag. (The D.A. was subtly attacking his manhood in other ways as well.) So naturally the defendant felt himself in a double-bind and, as is typical in such situations, became confused, then belligerent, then inarticulate--just what his adversary had in mind for him. In fact, put in a position where he could not break the rules and remain competent, he eventually found it unavoidable to break a more serious overriding rule: he began to ask the questions, drawing rebuke after admonition from the judge, and the jury's disgust.

This was not the only aim on the prosecutor's part. I have suggested that he made use of the interactive function of the tag. He also utilized its speech-act hedging aspect. Tags, you will recall, fall as speech acts between questions and declaratives, although it is probably better to view their function as more closely approximating the latter than the former. As I noted, the attorney's role in examining a witness is to ask questions--technically, to elicit information alone. The witness alone may provide that information. If the attorney slips into the witness' role, his opposite number will very likely object on the grounds that "counsel is leading the witness" if the witness is friendly, or that the line of questioning is "argumentative" if he is hostile. So straight declaratives are obviously impossible. Questions are ordinarily permissible, but have the disadvantage of suggestion to hearers that the questioner really doesn't know what the real answer is--a diminution of authority arising from the role of questioner itself. A tag is the answer to a lawyer's prayer: it states the desired information in declarative form (as authoritatively as possible in this context), yet frames it as a question, permissible under the rules of courtroom procedure. So we see that the tag, in ordinary conversational interaction a power-denying form, in this setting enhances the powers and effectiveness of its user. At the same time, it confuses and

constricts the responder. At the denouement, the D.A. asked, again in his whisper-soft tones, "You don't want to die...do you?" Is it any wonder that at that point the defendant could take no more, and burst out, "You're treating me like a criminal!"?

So we see that the tag, with its form and function residing somewhere between declarative and question, can put that ambiguity to work in very different ways, depending on context and speaker's requirements. We have a form that is par excellence an indicator of interaction: this is given. But what the nature of the interaction is to be, and what the speaker hopes to achieve thereby, are open. I have illustrated two very different interpretations: there are myriad in between.

With a clearer understanding of the tag's pragmatic functions, we can return to our earlier inspection of the syntax of the tag. We saw at the outset that, as much as any construction of English, the formation of tag questions is convoluted--its complexities not elucidated through an inspection of the syntactic rules governing its formation. Rather, I think we can understand its syntax only through its political implications: we gain so much interactively through its use that we are willing if not eager to take the trouble. And the trouble, the syntactic complexity, is a necessary concomitant of its intricate and socially delicate pragmatic function. In fact, we can look at its convolutions one by one to see what each gains for us at the pragmatic level:

1. The copied sentence, Declarative + Question: The double form expresses the fact that the speaker is, indeed, engaging in two types of speech acts at once, wants to accomplish two things at the same time: the conveying of information, and the request for the addressee's confirmation of it (the latter rendering the former less than fully authoritative). It gives the addressee the apparent choice of response--but in fact it states the information first and employs the question second, at the end of the speaker's turn, making it unlikely that the addressee can refuse to play the appropriate responsive role, but putting upon him the onus of responding not freely, but on the basis of the declarative part of the sentence: the options are significantly lessened.

2. The pronominalization and deletion in the copied part of the tag: This deletion of syntactic and semantic structure signals that the information requested in the question has, in fact, already been supplied (in the declarative), and that there is no need for it. All the addressee need do, or can do, is confirm. The question, as a mere request for confirmation, is in the tag structured as a skeletal version of the information itself, reinforcing the speaker's position. In this respect, tags of this kind convey more, pragmatically, than do their essential semantic equivalents, the "right?" and "huh?" constructions

common in English and other languages. The tag proper is more explicit about participants' roles and power relations than the others--perhaps one reason why it is not found more commonly in languages.

3. The negative: As we have seen, a tag question consists of two clauses, one negated, one not. If the first (the original) is negative, a negative response will be expected; if it is positive, a positive. (Compare: You didn't do that, did you? and You did that, didn't you?) In essence, the tag involves a yes-no question, with the addressee theoretically offered both options. This duality underscores the non-authoritative nature of the tag: unlike the typical yes-no question, it does not explicitly favor one response as correct or anticipated. But we notice, given the correlation between place of negative and addressee's expected response, that if the negative occurs in the declarative, the information-providing part of the sentence, it functions as part of the information, the "truth": you didn't do it. But if it occurs in the second part, it is there to offer the addressee an "out," but with less conviction: the speaker won't vouch for it.

I have gone in detail through the uses and formation of one English construction, in order to illustrate the link between form and function in grammar; to show that we cannot fully understand the rationale behind syntax except through an understanding of pragmatic function. In addition, I have argued that the forms language takes necessarily encode, and give speakers means of expressing real-life relationships, in particular intimacy and power. I have illustrated the incorporation of a power dynamic in choices we make of linguistic constructions; and have shown that our choice of forms is, intentionally or not, politically motivated and has political consequences. Not only can we better understand form by connecting it to function; but we can more fully comprehend our own and other people's aims and needs in communicating by observing the choice of forms they utilize, with reference to the real-world context in which they use them. There[3] is politics in language, and communication is inseparable from it.

Notes

[1]There have been many discussions of tag question formation and function in the linguistic literature. The original formulation of the rule, from a transformational-generative perspective, is in Klima (1964). Later discussion of the tag's syntactic properties and their implications are e.g. in Lakoff (1969) and Emonds (1970). There is discussion of the pragmatic consequences of the use of tags in Lakoff (1972, 1975).

[2]This statement is a considerable overgeneralization

and oversimplification. In fact, and interestingly, a direct imperative (Go home!) can be used in any of three distinct contexts with three very different implications:

1. As suggested here, if speaker's power blatantly outweighs that of the addressee, a direct imperative conveys that fact implicitly;

2. If participants are already in a relation of trust and intimacy, the use of the direct rather than the conveyed imperative (e.g., Isn't it time you were leaving?) indicates that power is not at issue. In such circumstances, the use of the indirect form, rather than conveying politeness as in the first situation above, may very well suggest the withdrawal of intimacy, or anger.

3. In true emergencies, where the accomplishment of an act is a matter of survival, this fact outweighs any considerations of relationship. Hence the most direct and shortest way of stating what must be done is the most appropriate: the direct imperative.

[3]The tag is not alone among constructions in having political repercussions--just an especially clear case. The interested reader may want to consider the relations between form and political function in the following constructions (themselves merely exemplary of a much longer list):

the passive

speech-act intensifiers (e.g., "I'm telling you," "absolutely.")

indirect injunctions (e.g., "It's cold in here," used to mean, "Shut the window!")

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